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AUTHOR Williams, Gregory
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ABSTRACT

The D-E Work Orientation Program at the Phanat Nikhom Refugee Camp is designed to prepare upper-level (D and E) students to enter and succeed in the American workplace. This preparation is especially important for these refugees since they are more likely than the lower-level students to get jobs during their first few months in the United States. They have greater language proficiency, tend to learn more quickly, and in other ways have more potential to succeed. However, none of these characteristics guarantees that they also have cross-cultural understanding or familiarity with appropriate behavior and language in the American workplace. The program provides 100 hours of preparation in these areas, enabling them to make the most effective use of their skills in the United States. The work orientation program includes daily instruction in math and English and provides on-the-job training simulations. The simulations are offered for electronic assembly, sewing factory, woodworking shop, restaurant, and silk-screening work. A concluding segment addresses refugee perceptions and management of on-the-job relationships. (MSE)

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THE D-E WORK ORIENTATION PILOT PROGRAM IN PHANAT NIKHOM

Gregory Williams

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Manila, Philippines
Washington, D.C.

Editorial Staff

Galang - Linda Schneider
Bataan - John Marston
Phanat Nikhom - Dory Bayer
Manila - Douglas Gilzow
Washington, D.C. - Donald A. Ranard

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The D-E Work Orientation Pilot Program in Phanat Nikhom

Gregory Williams
Phanat Nikhom Refugee Camp

The purpose of the D-E Work Orientation component is to prepare upper-level (levels D and E) students to enter and succeed in the U.S. workplace. This preparation is especially important for these refugees, since they are more likely than the lower-level students to get jobs during their first few months in the U.S. They have greater language proficiency, tend to learn more quickly, and in other ways have more potential to succeed. However, none of these characteristics guarantees that they also have cross-cultural understanding or familiarity with appropriate behavior and language in the American workplace. The D-E Work Orientation component provides them with 100 hours of preparation in these areas, to enable them to make the most effective use of their skills in the U.S.

Although Work Orientation classes in the Overseas Refugee Training Program had been provided since 1982 for lower-level students, by 1985 many staff members in the Phanat Nikhom program felt that upper-level students could also benefit from these classes.* We observed that some of the upper-level students were unfamiliar with common appliances – some were even afraid to plug in a slide projector. We also observed that upper-level students who were employed at the camp behaved in ways that would not be acceptable in the U.S. (for example, failing to report errors and never asking for help or clarification of instructions).

In addition, studies of refugees in the U.S. reported that they were having trouble in the American workplace (Latkiewicz and Anderson 1984). They were walking off the job for reasons that seemed trivial. Many were not reporting their mistakes or telling supervisors when they didn't understand (Literacy 85 1983; Becker, Karimer, and Mrowicki 1986). Some refugees were leaving or losing their jobs, not for lack of technical know-how or language skills, but because of cultural misunderstandings.

The need was clear. Even those refugees who had been successful professionals in their own country, and whose English was good, could benefit from a course that emphasized the development of basic technical skills, worksite language, and cross-cultural awareness. While the emphasis of Work Orientation (WO) for the lower levels is on getting a job, it was decided that the emphasis of upper-level WO should include keeping a job.

Program Design

In February 1985, a group of staff members from the ESL, Cultural Orientation (CO), and Pre-Employment Training components began designing D-E Work Orientation. We began by assessing the problems refugees faced on the job in the U.S. and drew up a list of needs of both refugee workers and their U.S. supervisors and employers. The WO curriculum was designed to meet these needs.

*Work Orientation has changed in form and name during the past four years. It began as Pre-Skills, a program designed for low-level hilltribe students at the Phanat Nikhom Refugee Camp. Pre-Employment Training (PET), which was also for low-level students, became a regional component of the Overseas Refugee Training Program in 1982. In spring 1985, a pilot program at Phanat Nikhom offered a modified version of PET to upper-level students. A regional task force meeting held later that year recommended that the entire PET component be renamed Work Orientation (WO) and that WO classes be required for all adult refugees.

The stage was then set to begin writing specific lessons. The team drew from a variety of resources, keeping in mind the original goal, "To prepare our students to enter and succeed in the U.S. workplace." In order for lessons to resemble the U.S. work environment as much as possible, the bulk of D-E WO instruction is through on-the-job training (OJT) simulations.

Students in D-E WO study four hours per day for twenty-five days, totaling one hundred class hours. The five-week WO segment begins after the students have completed fifteen weeks of CO and ESL; thus it serves as a laboratory for applying what they have learned earlier in the program. Each day in WO, a student has one hour of math, one hour of English, and two hours of OJT. The areas covered in math include basic math functions, graphs, tables, salary, word problems, and scales of measurement. The language functions emphasized in the English class include seeking clarification, socializing, following directions, and reporting progress or mistakes. In the OJT simulations, students apply their language and math skills as they use time cards, receive paychecks, apply for jobs, and demonstrate an understanding of workplace rules and policies. We address company and foreman expectations, rules, policy, and an array of typical paperwork: application forms, work order forms, labels, warnings, directions, charts, diagrams, material inventories, and pay-checks with deductions. Realistic OJTs not only provide a picture of the American people and the U.S. workplace, but also build the skills and confidence needed to function in the American setting.

OJT Simulations

The following OJTs are offered: electronic assembly, sewing factory, woodworking shop, restaurant, and silk-screening. Since we want these OJTs to resemble an authentic job environment, we refer to students as workers and teachers as foremen. During any OJT, when the foreman wants to create a learning situation, all he or she needs to do is invent a problem. For example, in the restaurant OJT the foreman may ask a customer to pay with a check, or conduct an impromptu health and safety inspection pointing out code violations. These provide instructive material for the processing (discussion) session at the end of the week, when students can more carefully examine the cross-cultural assumptions underlying the misunderstandings and other incidents that occurred during the OJT.

The silk-screen greeting card factory is based largely on an article from Galang that appeared in the first issue of *Passage* (Mariman and Stephens 1985). In the factory, workers are assigned stations where they measure and cut paper for cards and envelopes. They follow visual instructions on how to cut the paper and use templates to make the envelopes. Others prepare ink by measuring, mixing, and cooking the ingredients, while a third group stretches silk on frames, which are then mounted onto a board. They make jigs on the board for the rapid mass production of cards. The final product, a card with figures in several colors, requires a repetition of several steps in the silk-screening process. Understanding the importance of following step-by-step instructions and repeating them precisely is a valuable lesson for these students.

Workers mix ingredients and cook in the restaurant OJT.
Photo by Pranee Chokkajitsumpun.

The restaurant OJT simulation provides an opportunity for language practice and for reinforcing the WO concepts of safety, hygiene, speed, accuracy, and teamwork. Workers seat customers, take orders, prepare and serve food, total customers' bills, collect payment, bus tables, wash dishes, and clean the working space. Even in this simulated workplace, situations arise that challenge workers' language skills and their ability to work in an American job setting. On one occasion, a foreman yelled at a worker who was tearing a tea bag open to prepare a cup of tea. The worker was required to explain his actions and accept direct criticism. Another time a worker measured out a cup of powdered milk when the recipe had called for a cup of milk. He learned a lesson about dry vs. liquid measurement, but more important, he learned how to deal with a reprimand from the boss. A more serious situation took place when a worker turned on the gas oven and then

prepared to strike a match. The foreman yelled, "Stop!" then rushed over and grabbed him. This student learned quickly that what he had done was dangerous.

Workers following strict safety procedures in the woodworking OJT.

Photo by Pranee Chokkajitsumpun.

Our woodworking OJT simulates a furniture factory. Workers manufacture benches, making each part according to a work order before assembling the parts into a bench. There are periodic quality checks to ensure a minimum of re-work and material wastage, and a maximum number of good benches. Using saber saws and power drills requires the use of safety gear and careful attention to mandatory safety procedures. In this simulation and others, workers are reprimanded when they forget to use safety equipment, do sloppy work, or fail to ask for help when necessary. On-the-job safety is a daily theme of the OJT simulations.

Predictable areas of cross-cultural conflict are routinely addressed in this simulation and others. One potential area of misunderstanding is the use of laughter. If the foreman corrects a worker and the worker laughs (as is sometimes the case when an Asian feels embarrassed), the foreman doesn't accept it. He asks what is so funny and gives strong feedback to the worker that this is not appropriate. This point can be discussed again during end-of-the-week processing. Another misunderstanding arises when a worker stops working for no apparent reason and waits to be told what to do. The foreman yells, "Get to work!" and requires an explanation as to why the worker is not working. Usually the foreman discovers that the worker had a question about the task or didn't know what to do after the task was completed. The foreman then explains that it is the worker's responsibility to take the initiative and find out how to proceed.

In this OJT, the foreman sometimes stages "educational" problems by giving incomplete instructions, making errors on a work order form, or issuing defective equipment. If the foreman gives incomplete instructions and no one asks for clarification, he will yell at the workers for making errors without asking for more information. This incident can be discussed later: Why did the foreman get angry? What should the worker have done? The student will have another chance to try in the next OJT.

During the sewing factory OJT, the foreman controls the quality and flow of production by having workers fill out and follow work order forms. The workers are paid by the piece; their wages depend on the amount of production. Each station has a separate task dependent on the work completed at the previous station. As in the other OJTs, workers are given breaks and encouraged to socialize with fellow workers.

Foreman (teacher) assists a worker in the sewing factory OJT.

Photo by Charoensak "Kaew" Chongcharueyskul.

To support new roles in the workplace, men and women are assigned positions with no preference shown for one gender for specific tasks. Men and women are expected to perform at the same level on the job. One female worker hurt herself on a sewing machine, failed to report the accident, and was absent from class for the next few days. The foreman discovered what had happened when the worker returned, and she was criticized as any male worker would have been. This incident also raised the topic of worker's compensation, which led to a discussion of what happens if accidents at work are not reported.

Foreman (teacher) observes workers stripping a length of plastic from a wire in the electricity OJT.

Photo by Charoensak "Kaew" Chongcharueyskul.

The electricity OJT recreates an electronics assembly plant. Each worker is assigned to one of several roles. At the first assembly-line station, workers sort components by shape, size, color codes, or by matching numeric values to those on a numeric list. It is necessary for the worker to pay attention to polarity and other details. The boards are then soldered and inspected at subsequent stations. Workers check out all materials from a (student) storeroom clerk, using appropriate English expressions to request and check their orders. Inspectors in this simulation are also students, and they check each station's product more than once throughout the period.

Processing

At the end of the week-long OJT, there is a follow-up discussion, referred to as "processing." Processing addresses students' perceptions of on-the-job training and their behavior in that setting. The worker who gets yelled at during an OJT may quietly build a wall between the foreman and himself. During processing, the topic of yelling is addressed, and all students share reactions and ideas. The teacher may even have students act out what they imagine an American foreman would do in a certain situation and then act out what a refugee foreman would do. By contrasting the cultures and by discussing the meaning of conflicting behavior, we hope to build understanding.

Putting our students in the role of workers and having them deal with a foreman can help develop many of the skills, attitudes, and behaviors needed for the American workplace. Providing a forum for developing relationships with fellow workers and teaching appropriate language usage builds self-confidence and prepares refugees for success in the U.S. In WO, we believe that "once-over-lightly" is not enough and that daily practice will help the students to use the skills they are learning throughout the training program. After 100 hours of practice, students are better able to function and succeed in the U.S. workplace.

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Gregory Williams has been a Work Orientation (WO) supervisor at the Phanat Nikhom Refugee Camp since the component began in May 1982. Most recently he has been working with WO for upper-level students. Before joining the Consortium, Williams was a coordinator at the Hamilton Refugee Transit Center in California.